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ABSTRACT

An estimated 850,000 Canadian adults lack basic literacy skills. An examination of the profile and achievements of the students enrolled in the literacy education program at the Alberta Vocational Centre in Edmonton indicates that like the many other types in the broad range of adult literacy programs, the highly structured nature of the Edmonton program has made it attractive to a certain subset of the student population. Few of the Edmonton program's typical students (predominately older women with dependents) even achieve functional literacy (defined as ninth-grade equivalency). Twenty-five students enrolled in the program were surveyed to determine the reasons for this. Most of the students were not interested in literacy in and of itself; rather, they viewed literacy as a stepping stone. Most students wished to upgrade as quickly as possible and find employment. Their goal was not to achieve 12th- or even 9th-grade literacy. Perhaps because of their childhood experiences of how reading is learned, most of the students were quite stubborn in clinging to their ideas about vocabulary and phonetic theory, and most had only a vague understanding of what higher literacy skills are intended to achieve. This goes a long way toward explaining why the reading levels of students in the Edmonton program tend to rise a number of levels and then peak. It also reinforces the idea that adults who have learned to survive in a nonliterate world may be reluctant to leave it and may be content with limited gains. It should also be remembered that these gains may be all that can reasonably be expected and that they may in fact lay the foundation for future larger gains. (MN)

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CAN THE PROBLEM OF ILLITERACY BE SOLVED?
A VIEW BASED ON AVC EDMONTON'S ADULT BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAM.

A PAPER PREPARED FOR:

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Note: The views expressed in this paper are the views of the author. They are not in any way intended to reflect the views of AVC, Edmonton.

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INTRODUCTION

Within the last year the issue of illiteracy has justifiably received considerable public attention in Canada (EACER, 1986). The close to one million Canadians who have no or few literacy skills and the four million Canadians who are "functionally" illiterate have finally become the focus of public debate. After years of crying in the wilderness,adult educators are understandably pleased that illiteracy has become a public issue. "The fight against illiteracy unquestionably is on [an] uphill climb...." declared Claire Moccio of Niagara College in the November, 1986 issue of COLLEGE CANADA (Moccio, 1986:3.) The problem having finally been recognized by the public, adult educators can hardly be blamed for enthusiastically calling for the political and financial support to eradicate the "virus" (Moccio) of illiteracy.

Compelling economic reasons for addressing the problem of illiteracy have often been pointed out. For example, Nicole Vigeant (1986:3) correctly points out that illiteracy is an "economic menace of national proportions." Canada needs a literate work force in order to operate the industries of the future. Individuals who seek a place in the economy require higher levels of education than most Canadians have. Vigeant states that between "now and 1990, 80% of all jobs will specify post-secondary studies as a criterion for hiring." Illiteracy is a problem neither the nation as a whole nor the individual can afford to ignore.

Now that illiteracy and low literacy have become public issues, the pressure on adult educators to solve the problem is mounting. However, responsible adult educators should think carefully before responding to this pressure hastily.

For general purposes, functional illiteracy has been defined as reading and writing skills at a grade nine equivalent; basic literacy has been defined as functioning at grade 5 equivalent. (Thomas, 1983). On the basis of these commonly accepted definitions, Canada has four million functional illiterates; within that group there are 850,000 adults who do not meet basic literacy standards.

There are close to one million individuals who lack basic literacy. This is an enormous problem. Sufficient programs, or resources to establish new programs, to address the literacy needs of this number of adult alone are simply not available at this time. The size alone of the basic literacy problem should encourage adult educators to think carefully before attempting to tackle it. However, the size of the problem is not the only concern.

The adult basic education program at Alberta Vocational Centre, Edmonton (AVC), serves illiterates and low literates (0-6 literacy levels). Experience with this program suggests that there are good reasons for adult educators to reflect carefully about whether illiteracy can be eradicated. Based on the experiences of AVC's basic education program, there are four factors which urge caution. First, despite methodological change, instructional delivery flexibility, and almost complete staff turn-over in the course of the last decade, there has been no major change in the reading gains made by students. Second, social/psychological factors characteristic of the client population seem to limit the literacy development of students in the program. Third, characteristics of the program seem to attract a specific kind client seeking literacy, but at the same time discourage others from entering the program. Fourth, literacy defined as either functional grade 9 level, or grade 12 level, does not seem to correspond with the actual goals of students enrolled in AVC's basic education program.

Illiteracy is not a simple problem. AVC's adult basic education instructors and students know this all too well. Instructor experiences, students life stories, experiences students have shared with instructors, as well as survey and questionnaire information, all make clear the difficulties both students and instructors face in addressing the issue of illiteracy. Reviewing the experiences of AVC's adult basic education program may help adult educators to reflect carefully on the problem of illiteracy so that they can respond to the public call to eliminate illiteracy without promising too much and delivering too little.

LIMITED SUCCESS OF CHANGES IN INSTRUCTIONAL METHODOLOGY

There is increasing evidence that adult educators know too little about how adults achieve literacy and therefore existing programs simply do not dramatically improve literacy and reading skills.. Within the last decade Malicki and Norman (1983, 1985), as well as Amoroso (1984) have pointed to the need for close re-examination of instructional methods used in literacy programs.

Malicki and Norman in their 1983 study found that adults at lower levels of literacy development (reading grade 1-2) made less progress than did students at a 3-6 level. Alberta Vocational Centre's Adult Basic Education Program confirms these findings.

READING IMPROVEMENT OF ONGOING ABE STUDENTS ENROLLED AT ALBERTA VOCATIONAL CENTRE EDMONTON, NOVEMBER 15, 1986.

GRADE EQUIVALENCY LEVEL	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	AVERAGE LENGTH OF STAY	AVERAGE GAIN IN READING READING SCORE
0-3	18	46 WKS	.81
4-5	22	30 WKS	1.90
6-7	18	20 WKS	2.00

AVC students who entered at a 0-3 reading level improved almost one grade level after close to 50 weeks, those who entered at a 4-5 level improved almost two reading levels in 30 weeks, and those who entered at a 6-7 level, progressed two grade levels in less than 20 weeks.

AVC's experience indicates that there are clear gains in reading levels at the adult basic education level. However, these gains are often hard won by students, and most adult basic students leave the program to enter short skill training programs or employment after making limited gains ranging from 1 to 4 reading levels. Very few adult basic education students at AVC progress to a grade 9 equivalency level and only in very exceptional cases have students gone on to complete grade 12 diploma examinations. Adult basic education students generally do not achieve what adult educators define as functional literacy; fewer students still qualify for a grade 12 high school diploma. These facts have often disappointed both instructors and administrators.

More frustrating still to adult basic education staff has been the realization that despite changes in instructional methods, varied delivery methods, and staff personnel changes, there has not been a significant change in student's reading development. In the course of the last decade methods of teaching reading and writing have been changed. In the late 1970's, a skills competency based approach prevailed. In the early 1980's, the functional approach became dominant. Within the last two to three years the program has been greatly influenced by Malicki and Norman's research (1984,1985). As recommended by them, AVC now uses "whole language" approaches in which passages or stories are read to adults to take advantage of the notion of "bathing" people in print. Language experience methods are employed whereby passages dictated to the teacher by the student are later used by the student to develop reading. Brief functional writing techniques are used. Instructors feel that methods recommended by Norman and Malicki have proved relatively successful for students at a 4-5 and 6-7 level. These same methods have also been employed at a 0-3 level. However, at this level students are also exposed to "sounding out" word approaches and vocabulary development skills because students often cannot read or write at all.

Just as important, students demand vocabulary and phonetic approaches. Students, as Malicki noted, view reading as word identification (Malicki and Norman, 1985). In AVC's experience, students have sometimes insisted that they could not read because they could not "spell the words." In order to give students confidence that they are learning, sounding out words and vocabulary development are incorporated into the program.

Instructional delivery itself takes a number of forms. It includes individual and group learning activities, and direct instruction on the part of team teachers as well as individual teachers. Student-teacher ratios have been kept relatively low. Classes at the 0-3 level average 7 students per teacher, 4-5 classes approximately 11.5 students per teacher, and 6-7 classes about 14 students per teacher (Academic Upgrading, Annual Report, 1986). As well, over the last decade, there has been an almost complete turn-over of teaching personnel. There has been, and is, little uniformity in instructional delivery.

Yet, in the last decade, despite changes in instructional methodology, variety in instructional delivery, and staff changes, the impact on student reading improvement seems to be negligible. It may be as Lindsey and Jarman (1984), suggest that adult educators simply do not yet know enough about how low literacy level adults achieve writing and reading skills, and that this accounts for the lack of discernible improvement in literacy skills among adults despite changes in methodology and instructional delivery. Further, as in the past, students still leave after some improvement in reading and writing skills. The program has a drop out rate ranging from 15% to 20% per quarter year (Academic Upgrading, Term Summary, February, 1987) which is also consistent with past experience.

Though reading level results have not shown improvement, the program has experienced some success. First, follow up research conducted with former students indicate that close to 98% of student respond that participation in AVC's program has made them feel better about themselves (Fahy, 1985). The same research also shows that students are so positive about the program that they recommend the program to friends. Second, the majority of students who participated in basic education programs either went on to employment, or enrolled in skill courses not requiring high literacy levels. For example, students from basic education have availed themselves of further training in the institutional aide, building service worker, and short order cook programs. These two positive outcomes of the program are at least some consolation to instructors and administrators as they continue to search for ways to improve students' literacy levels.

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Instructor observation and results of student surveys point to a possible explanation which may help to account for the phenomenon that changes in delivery methods do not result in improved literacy results. Discussions among instructors, counsellors, and supervisors have concluded that adult basic education students achieve only limited progress in literacy development because of characteristics of the student population itself.

Participants in discussions have been at pains not to blame students for limited literacy development. In their study, Malicki and Norman (1985) found that students felt responsible for their own illiteracy, and warn against the easy tempation of "blaming the victim." But both instructors and counsellors agree that the socially and psychologically disadvantaged background of students may be the factor which limits progress in literacy.

Gains in literacy may not be possible unless the social and psychological handicaps characteristic of the student population are addressed more clearly either simultaneously or prior to efforts to enhance literacy. AVC personnel generally agree with Hunter and Harmon when they argue that illiteracy is interwoven with issues of class, race, and social problems; when society faces these problems squarely, then "the number of persons and groups that achieve higher standards of literacy will likely increase" (1979: 108). In other words, illiteracy is a symptom of a much larger social malaise; unless we address the major disease, the symptom may not disappear and increases in literacy will not result.

A review of both demographic information, students' life stories, and instructor experiences with students indicates that AVC's students are indeed victims of ills prevalent in modern society. Both student demographic profiles and social/psychological show students to belong to what Hunter and Harmon call "the socially and educationally disadvantaged."

AVC's typical adult basic education student has remained remarkably similar over the last decade. A brief demographic survey completed by students presently in 0-3 and 4-5 level classes, when compared to a student profile compiled by Romanko (1976) confirms this. By also looking at demographic data profiling upgrading students in general (levels 0-12), adult basic education students emerge as individuals who are similar in kind to the general upgrading population but differ in degree from them.

AVC STUDENT PROFILES

	1976 AVC STUDENTS	1985 ACADEMIC UPGRADING STUDENTS	1987 BASIC EDUCATION STUDENTS
AVERAGE AGE	25.8 YRS	26.9 YRS	31.8 YRS
AVERAGE PREVIOUS EDUCATION BY GRADE	GR.9.9	GR.10.5	GR.7.1
YEARS OUT OF SCHOOL BEFORE RETURN	8.9YRS	--	19.5YRS
% OF AGENCY SPONSORED STUDENTS	98.3%	90% (EST)	98%
GENDER	--	60% F 40% M	70% F 30% M
STUDENTS WITH DEPENDENTS	46.5%	38%	52%
MARRIED OR COMMON LAW	37.3%	21%	21%

This brief profile indicates that Canadian born adult basic education students tend to be older than upgrading students in general; they tend to have a previous education markedly lower than upgrading students; and they have returned to school after a period of almost 20 years, nearly twice as long as AVC students in general. There are more women than men in the basic education program when compared to upgrading students in general. Just as was the case of most AVC students 10 years ago, adult basic education students are poor and highly dependent on social assistance or other agency funding. This contrasts slightly with recent upgrading students who have shown a slight decline in reliance on funding. Correlating the figures from the table regarding gender, marital status, and students with dependents, it appears that adult basic education students more often than not tend to be single mothers with dependents. This brief review of demographics alone confirms that adult basic education students are disadvantaged individuals who do not belong to the mainstream of

Canadian society. AVC's adult basic education students now, as ten years ago, are often single mothers, economically dependent, virtually illiterate, and have returned to school after a long absence and at a later age than do upgrading students generally.

In addition to listing demographic information, Romanko's report of 1976 also described AVC students in general as having the following social/psychological characteristics:

1. lack self confidence, low self esteem
2. low level of problem solving, decision making skills
3. high dependency on "authority figures"
4. low level of resourcefulness in using community services
5. high incidence of neglect of health
6. poorly developed interpersonal skills
7. significant incidence of learning disabilities and emotional stress

On the basis of students' life stories, it is clear that adult basic education students today show all the characteristics Romanko described in 1976. The stories of Caroline, Laurel, Hugh, George and Helen serve as illustrations.

Caroline, a woman in her late forties of part native background, told her life story which clearly indicates her lack of self worth. She described why she never went to school in her youth. Her grandmother was all alone and so Caroline was sent to live with her. Caroline's youth was characterized by living for her grandmother, not for herself. The way she told this story indicated no anger or frustration at opportunities she may have lost. Similarly, she told without emotion how she gave up what she felt was a good job working on a farm for a husband who shortly afterwards left her.

Another student, Laurel, described how she was finally able to attend school at age 9 after her family gave up a remote homestead. She tells us that for her school was not about learning "reading and writing;" instead, while other pupils did class work, Laurel sewed for the teacher. Not surprisingly, she stopped attending school, after three years. She stayed at home for a few years and married at age 15. Like Caroline, Laurel too told her story with little rancor. Going to school and not learning to read and write was her explanation of why she could not do these things now. She did not seem to feel that sewing for the teacher was in the least bit out of order. Both Caroline and Laurel have accepted life with a passivity characteristic of those who have little sense of self worth.

Hugh, is a 27 year old student who attended school up to grade 11 in a special vocational high school. He described his time in school and the years after as being a time when he just "hung around." His life had no direction. His story is short and rather empty; according to him there was nothing worthwhile to tell about his life.

Students at the adult basic education level for the most part show a low level decision making skills, and little resourcefulness in using community resources even when addressing such vital things as their health. The story of George illustrates this almost too well. George is a 26 year old young man from the Northwest Territories who attended school for at most three years. He worked for a number of years as a "pump jockey" and barge hand. Prior to coming to AVC he was involved in a severe fight, sustained a head injury, and was hospitalized for over a year. His doctor helped him to come to AVC, she also insisted that he see her on a monthly basis because the head injury had required an operation which had been only partly successful. George did not keep these appointments despite the urgings of instructors. Only when complications resulting from the operation resulted in physical collapse, did he get medical help at which time the doctor immediately hospitalized him. Upon his return to AVC some months later, he was instructed to take medications regularly. Through the doctor and counsellor, arrangements were made for payment of medications. George wouldn't take the medication. Though the pills did not cause him discomfort or pain, he said "I don't like taking pills." George simply could not accept the help offered by the doctor and his AVC counsellor, and he could not make a reasonable decisions about the medication even though his health and his life were at issue.

When students initally enroll they often have difficulty relating to one another and the teacher. Poorly developed social skills characterize many adult basic education students. It often takes ten weeks at AVC to make students feel relaxed enough before serious attention can be paid to literacy issues themselves. Helen, a student in her mid-thirties who had gone to school up to grade 7 in her youth, describes in her story how afraid she was of coming to AVC because of all the people there. She told how she was afraid of talking to other students and consequently she did not say anying for "two whole terms" (20 weeks). At the time she wrote her life story she said she was glad she was no longer so shy and now had many friends.

Adult basic education students, as Romanko indicated, often have a history of learning disabilities. Three students presently enrolled attended public schools up to the grade 11 and 12 levels, yet their reading and writing skills upon entering AVC were at a grade 4-5 level; in addition to attending basic education classes, these students are now working with learning specialists to assess and possibly address their learning disabilities. Many adult basic education students suffer from learning disabilities. AVC's learning disabilities unit is able to handle some 30 students at any one time. At last report, 22 students were from the basic education area which has a total enrollment of 115 students; this compares with about seven students out of 600 general upgrading students who are helped by the learning disabilities unit.

Romanko's 1976 observation that adult basic education students are often characterized by emotional stress may be a kind of understatement. Instructors observe that many adult basic education students presently enrolled may be psychologically maimed by past non-educational experiences.

A few examples will have to suffice to make this point. In February of 1986, 4-5 level classes were addressed by a speaker from the Edmonton Rape Crisis Centre. In group discussion which followed, a middle aged woman sobbingly told the class that as a child she had been sexually abused by a male relative. Three or four other students told of similar experiences. The next day, as is usual, students wrote in their journals for the first five minutes of class. Instructors reviewing the journal books were shocked to find that 40% of women students wrote of events indicating sexual abuse in their childhood or early teens. Marie Laing, former head of the Edmonton Rape Crisis Centre, indicates that the psychological trauma of sexual assault is so severe, that victims -- even long after the actual event -- often have difficulty communicating both feelings and concrete events clearly. She speculated that learning to write may be extremely hard for them (Laing, 1986).

Alcohol related traumas also afflict adult basic education students. A significant number of adult basic education students registered at AVC have told instructors that they came from homes where one or both parents were alcoholics. Some women students have left their husbands owing to alcohol abuse either because husbands became unbearable burdens when in alcoholic stupors, or because women students were repeatedly beaten by drunk husbands. Married female students continue to suffer from alcohol related violence. A month does not go by without a female student coming to class severely bruised. Female students have been hospitalized owing to alcohol related violence. As well,a significant number of male students have recent histories of alcohol abuse. Some male students are still battling their alcohol addiction.

The students enrolled at AVC are part of a marginal group within society as a whole. As Romanko (1976:6) said:

> A startling number of students manifest unawareness of and alienation from ... social processes operative in the immediate and broader communities. They see themselves as victims of society rather than participants and molders of it. It should be emphasized that the psycho-sociological characteristics identified...are most prevalent among those students with the lowest level of formal education....

Student life stories and the observations of instructors confirm Romanko's appraisal as still valid.

The point of profiling and characterizing adult basic education students as belonging to a marginal social strata is not to suggest that they belong to some fringe element and therefore can be

forgotten. Rather, the point is that adult basic education students face severe impediments to learning. There are social factors which limit the energy which they can apply to developing literacy. On the basis of the high percentage of social service and other agency sponsored students, it is clear that students' budgets are very limited. They must plan very carefully whenever they make an expenditure; unlike most adult educators they have neither bank cards or overdraft privileges as a cushion when the the budget at the end of the month does not balance.

A majority of students have responsibilities to care for children -- responsibilites they must often face alone without a husband, or the support of an extended family. It should be remembered too that student's children demand the same things of them as an educator's children. This is true both emotionally and materially. Students, especially those recently enrolled, often complain that their children act up in the evenings. This is quite understandable. Children used to having mother around all day who suddenly are cared for at day care facilities desperately want mother's attentions. They, for example, insist on interrupting mother who is trying to read a little more, or they refuse to go to bed on time. Learning to read can quickly drop as a major priority in the face of the demands of a two or three year old.

The children of students also place demands on their parents for material things. Students' children too would like to go to MacDonald's when they see the big M, they too want to have the latest toy advertised on supper time television, and they too want to wear designer jeans like the other kids. The difference, of course, is that the student mother or father barely surviving on social assistance or student allowances cannot afford any of these things. This must lead to frustration with learning to read and write and bring to mind thoughts of getting a job as quickly as possible.

Keeping in mind that many students may have come from, and others still live in, alcohol determined environments, and that still others are victims of child abuse or neglect, or are learning disabled, it is not surprising that the energy students can commit to learning to read and write is rather limited. Students face problems which are much more emotionally immediate and often more compelling and concrete to them than the abstract ideals of learning to read and write well.

In the face of psychological pain, beatings, feelings of worthlessness or powerlessness, and extreme frustration in the face of learning to read the printed word the instructor as therapist (Amoroso, 1984) is often powerless. If students are to be more open to literacy development and its benefits, they must also have opportunities to escape their social and psychological bonds. It is only a partial solution to offer the socially and psychologically imprisoned basic education programs: they require the social psychological keys which will free them to take fuller advantage of literacy programs.

ADULT BASIC EDUCATION SUB-GROUP AND PROGRAM ATTRACTION

The profile and characteristics of students enrolled in AVC's adult basic education program helps in understanding another point. As the discussion of student demographics has indicated, AVC' adult basic education students -- both those presently enrolled and those who attended in the past -- have similar characteristics. This tends to suggest that there are things about the nature of the program which appeal to the kind of clientele it is attracting. Looking at this point another way, the same elements which are attracting one group of students may be discouraging other students from attending the kind of program AVC Edmonton offers. Research supports this speculation. For example, Johnstone and Rivera (1965), and Hiemstra (1975) found that independent learners liked to use their own learning methods, wanted immediate results, and disliked classroom institutional settings. Clearly, these individuals would not find an institutional, classroom centered program to their liking.

What things about AVC's adult basic education program might make it attractive to some students while discouraging others from entering?

There are a number of things that can be considered.
The adult basic education program is offered in a downtown eight story government designed building which projects modern institutional stability. The mature students AVC attracts may find this institutional setting reassuring. In contrast, younger potential clients whose experience with schools may be more recent, may well be resistant to attending a program in an institutional setting.

Support systems for students within AVC are extensive. Career and personal counselling services, special needs counsellors who can assist students with everything from finding employment to alternate day care services, are available. The mature, predominantly female, clientele used to dependence on social services may well find comfort and support in AVC's environment. Younger students may find these semi-parental supports stifling.

Because many students are sponsored and consequently the institution is accountable in terms of assuring reasonable student progress, AVC's program has relatively strict attendance and performance rules in addition to academic rules which most institutions have for both academic and behavior. AVC's more mature students generally accept rules as given. Younger students who are enrolled in the program are often not as accepting and rebel passively or actively against them; it is quite possible that the institution's reputation among the young is seen as overly strict and authoritarian. If this is the case, it may account for the absence of young potential basic education students.

Finally, AVC basic education students tend to be dependent on teachers. The program probably encourages this by both its methods of teacher guided learning, and the central role instructors play in supporting students emotionally. As a matter of policy, instructors

are encouraged to actively assist students with both personal and learning matters in and outside class time. AVC's older students seem to appreciate this approach. Younger students may perceive support and encouragement as interference.

For whatever reason, conspicuous by their absence from AVC's basic education program, are young illiterate adults who may not have dependents, may not qualify for sponsorship, and who may have left school more recently. As was pointed out in a recent article on Toronto's Beat the Streets Program, "Institutions can't help them [street youth] because they don't trust institutions" (Steed, 1987:D4). This observation may well be true; as the picture of AVC's students has shown, it includes very few young students, at least in the literacy program. The program does not seem to attract many young low literate or illiterate students.

What emerges from this review of the student profile and the characteristics of the typical AVC literacy level student is that the program's institutional setting and systems select a specific subset within the larger population of educationally and socially disadvantaged individuals. This line of reasoning is not to suggest that AVC's program is necessarily incorrect in its approach; the intention is to point out that by its very nature the program selects a specific clientele. In the case of AVC, this consists primarily of older, female students with dependents. Most of these women have some experience of attending school in the distant past. Given a different setting, fewer and more flexible rules, and more casual instructor roles, it is quite possible that a different sub-group of the educationally and socially disadvantaged would be attracted.

Generalizing from this understanding brings us to one of the major problems standing in the way of addressing illiteracy. No matter what kind of program is established, it will attract only a sub-group contained within the larger population of those in need of literacy services. Volunteer tutor programs set up in store fronts, individualized self paced program based on home study with telephone tutors, outreach style programs based in a community school, and AVC's instutional teacher guided program, each select a different and distinct sub-group of those requiring literacy.

This suggests that only an extremely broad array of program alternatives would serve to attract the different sub-groups within the population of the educationally and socially disadvanted who need literacy. It is doubtful that the human and financial resources exist, not to speak of political will, to make a broad variety of programs available. This means that adult educators will inevitably be able to serve only subsets of the 850,000 individuals requiring literacy training. Viewed from the perspective that programs only appeal to certain subsets of the disadvantaged, means that illiteracy will continue to plague many individuals and the nation as a whole.

ADULT BASIC STUDENTS AND LITERACY

As indicated earlier, AVC's low literacy and illiterate students rarely achieve functional literacy defined as grade 9 equivalency, and only the rare basic education student continues his education to a grade 12 literacy equivalent. Most students leave the program for employment or short skill training programs before ever reaching high literacy levels. Why is this? Why do students enroll in a literacy program make some progress and then leave? To try to answer this question, a short questionnaire was developed and Canadian born students were asked to respond.

The questionnaire students filled out were originally constructed on the basis of ideas presented in Malicki and Norman's 1985 paper, LITERACY AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON: IMPLICATIONS FOR ADULT INSTRUCTION (1985). Questions based on the paper were answered by 25 students and both questions and answers were then discussed with them.

All 25 students indicated that they wanted to learn to read and write. The main reason students gave for wanting to improve literacy was that this would improve their chances of obtaining jobs or better jobs than they had in the past. This instrumental motivation was strongly supported by the majority of students who also indicated that they wished to improve literacy in order to fill out job applications, do banking, and carry out other day to day things which Harris (1970-71) would no doubt describe as functional.

Students were also asked to indicate what their goal was in attending the program. Interestingly, four students reported that reading and writing was in itself the goal; one of these students, a grandmother in her late 40's, added the comment that she wished to read her grandchildren stories. Most students, however, gave career goals. Six students aspired to modest careers. After improving their reading and writing skills they hoped to enter short training programs like clerical assistant, institutional aide, and building service worker. These are available at AVC. The majority of the students who selected these modest but probably achievable goals had attended AVC on average over a year, longer than other students surveyed. Another four students indicated equally modest and perhaps attainable, career goals like mechanic, bank teller, medical receptionist, and surveyor. These students had all attended for at least 30 weeks and tended to be older than the average age of 31. There were also six students who indicated relatively high level goals requiring post secondary training beyond grade 12.

Goals of this kind included computer processing, accounting, physiotherapist, and business management. Students who selected these ambitious goals tended to have been involved in basic education for an average of only 22 weeks. Three of these students were in their early 20's. Of the two older students, one has shown considerable progress having moved from virtual illiteracy to a grade 4-5 level within the last year. Discussion of goals revealed that those who chose high goals were not aware of the academic requirements of the goals. The

student who had selected physiotherapy had taken physiotherapy treatment and felt she could do like work; but she was not aware of the academically demanding and lengthy educational requirements; the two students who had expressed an interest in computer careers incorrectly equated learning to use Bank Street Writer (a simple word processing program) in AVC's computer laboratory with programming. The student who showed interest in a management career had worked in a department store and felt that she too could manage a section in a department store.

Discussion of goals with students also revealed that most were anxious to develop literacy skills as quickly as possible so they could go on to specific training programs and jobs as soon as possible.

There are a number of observations that can be made on the findings so far: (1) adult basic students probably re-assess their goals once they have been in a program for some time; (2) they tend for the most part to select goals requiring modest upgrading; (3) those who choose high level goals may not fully understand goal requirements or may be over optimistic about their rate of progress; and (4), students wish to be employed as quickly as possible. The main observation to be made is that most students were not interested in literacy in itself. They saw literacy as a stepping stone. Most chose career goals which either require limited literacy, or they perceived to require limited literacy. The majority of students wished to upgrade as quickly as possible and find employment. Their goal was not to achieve grade 12 or even grade 9 literacy.

While most students questioned indicated instrumental motives for wishing to read and write better, the same students also indicated that they wished to learn to read and write, to "feel better about myself. "For sixteen of the students, this meant feeling equal to others or "the same as others." This desire of students is described by Scribner's metaphor of "literacy as power" (Scribner,1984:11). Ten students also indicated that literacy for them meant that they would be better persons if they learned to read and write more effectively.

Discussion of these points brought out that students seemed to feel that participating in an educational program had in some way changed them. The impression obtained on this point was not that students felt that literacy as such would make them better. In discussions, students did not associate literacy skills as such with becoming a better person. Rather students felt that they had been changed by participation in the adult basic education program. "I've learned lots here," "I feel better about myself now that I've come back to school," and " I've never thought I would stick it out this long," were typical statements. These comments point out that students felt good about taking control of their lives and felt good about their ability to acquire new general information. Participation in and staying with the program appeared as the sources of satisfaction.

Significant here is the notion that adult basic education students when asked why they wanted to learn to read and write better, in fact answered in terms more general than the desire for improved reading and writing skills. Literacy, even for students enrolled in a literacy program, does not seem to be their main goal; participation with others and feeling more in control of themselves and appeared to be more important.

When asked how they thought they would learn to read and write best, students confirmed Malicki and Norman's findings that low literacy students favor phonetic methods and vocabulary development. They were asked what they thought about the benefits of having stories or passages read to them frequently and then being asked to read the same things themselves (immersion method); they were also asked what they thought about reading stories or passages they themselves had previously dictated to teachers (whole language method). Students indicated that they really didn't understand what they were supposed to gain from reading stories which they already knew from the teachers repeated readings of the same material. Students found reading stories they had dictated to the teacher satisfying. "It was interesting," was one comment. However, they did not see how this would benefit their reading skills. Students wanted to know what letters made what sounds and wanted to learn new words. If they learned these things they felt they were making progress.

These student responses may point to the reason why reading gains of basic education students go up a number of levels and then peak. Students have clear preconceptions of what reading means. These preconceptions stand in the way of recognizing that reading involves a process of recognizing that the printed word is meant to evoke in the reader's mind knowledge of the world the reader already possesses. Perhaps because of childhood experiences of how reading is learned, perhaps because of insufficient exposure to abstract and symbolic thought, students quite stubbornly and inflexibly clung to their ideas about vocabulary and phonetic theory.

Understandably, low literacy level adults really have only a vague understanding of what reading and writing is intended to achieve. The more abstract communication and thinking processes involved in reading and writing are alien to them; the higher elements of literacy are a kind of mystery which students approach cautiously and very conservatively.

One of the last questions asked what independent activities, aside from attending the program, might enhance reading and writing skills. Over half the students responded with answers like "I could read more on my own." This answer was no doubt influenced by the urging of instructors. The most interesting part of the response, however, is that students answered in the conditional -- " I could read more." Clearly, students know what might help them improve their skills but this knowledge has not been internalized by them.

In discussing the issue of reading not related to the program, students were asked what they did in their spare time that they most enjoyed. Among relevant answers, the most prominent was visiting and talking with friends and the second most common answer was watching television. What these responses point to is that basic education adults do not see reading as an enjoyable pastime. It is work and best left to the program environment. Basic education students simply are not part of the literate culture, they do not share what Scribner calls "the state of grace" of literate society.

Student's lack of practicing reading skills outside the program environment does not mean they are lazy, it does not even mean that they are not motivated to learn to read better. Clearly, they say that they wish to improve their reading and writing skills, and this must be accepted as an honest answer. At the level of instumental motivation they do indeed wish to learn to read. However, this does not mean that they wish to enter literate society wholeheartedly.

At some level adult basic education students understand that becoming truly literate may mean leaving behind them their old pastimes, perhaps their old friendships, old ways of doing things, and perhaps their whole old way of life. Learning to read and write well may present students with possibilities of change greater than they are prepared to entertain. Becoming truly literate means changing the way one sees the world and the way one acts in it.

Students outside the "magic circle of the literate" know their own world; they have survived in it; they have developed coping mechanisms to compensate for their lack of reading and writing skills, and they have established informal networks which allow them to cope. In her life story, one totally illiterate student said, "People are nice to illiterates. They help them find jobs." This student had clearly come to terms with illiteracy; she used it to obtain help from others. This may be an extreme example of having come to terms with illiteracy. However, expecting low literacy students who are familiar with their own world to enter the alien sphere of the literate is perhaps expecting too much. It represent for them a journey into the unkown. Most illiterates, just as most adult educators, prefer the security of the known when confronted with the perils.

On the basis of questions and discussions with AVC's adult basic students it seems clear that most low literacy and illiterate adults do not really strive for high levels of literacy. The goals of grade 9 functional literacy or grade 12 achievement levels are goals set by adult educators. Adult students are much more realistic and modest in their desires. They seek improved
literacy to the extent that they can obtain jobs requiring limited literacy. Most adult basic students feel better about themselves because they have taken advantage of a literacy program. They have taken a tentative step to join the mainstream society of the literate. However, most low literate adults are content with this small step. To leap wholeheartedly into the world of literacy is too great a risk.

CONCLUSION

The 850,000 adults in Canada who lack basic literacy need the support and help of adult educators in overcoming their lack of reading and writing skills. This support should be forthcoming.
Adult educators must continue their search for more effective adult instructional methodologies. They must recognize that social/psychological problems limit the ability of adult basic education students to develop higher literacy skills. Knowing this, adult educators must actively support existing social service and mental health programs and encourage the development of new initiatives that strive to address society's social ills. Adult educators must recognize that the nature of any given program will only attract a certain sub-group within the large population requiring literacy training. Educational administrators and politicians must be urged to recognize the worth of existing programs and must be encouraged to add to the variety of program delivery models. There is no single program model which will serve all. Finally, adult educators must recognize that expecting adults -- who have survived in, and built a life in, a non-literate world -- to leave that world may be expecting too much. Adult educators must be patient. They must recognize that any literacy gains made by low literacy level adults are worthy of recognition. Just as adults seem content with limited gains, so too should adult educators. These seemingly small gains may lay the foundation for future larger gains.

In conclusion, it is important to remember that despite the great difficulties just presented, adult basic education programs do achieve positive results. Like others, the adult basic education program at AVC, Edmonton does succeed in increasing literacy levels, even if not to the levels instructors and supervisors would like. Students feel satisfaction as a result of participating in the program, they successfully challange short skill programs, and despite the increasing demand for more highly educated people, they find jobs. These accomplishments are a credit to these students who struggle so hard to help themselves despite the tremendous disadvantages they face.

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